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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON NAGORNO-KARABAKH: CEASEFIRE VIOLATIONS
CONTINUE

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED; NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION.

¶1. (U) Militant rhetoric on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict during the past week followed reports of ceasefire violations and an announcement that three soldiers were convicted of treason for collusion with Armenia. Meanwhile President Aliyev called on the Armenians to accept the useful suggestions of the Minsk Group Co-Chairs. Below is the first of regular Embassy Baku snapshot reporting on Nagorno-Karabakh related incidents and statements in Azerbaijan.

TWO SOLDIERS KILLED ON LOC

¶2. (U) Ceasefire violations along the line of contact have become increasingly frequent in the past week. Azerbaijani press reports that Armenian troops have been firing near the villages of Gazakh, Aghdam, Terter, and other front-line villages. The Ministry of Defense reported that during March 18-19, Armenian soldiers twice attempted forward movement from their current positions. Reports indicate fatalities on both sides, including two Azerbaijani soldiers and one wounded Azerbaijani soldier. No information was available regarding Armenian casualties. Independent TV station ANS sent a correspondent to the area to broadcast footage on March 19, during which gunfire could be heard in the background.

THREE SOLDIERS CONVICTED FOR TREASON

¶3. (U) The Ministry of National Security just released information that on October 7, 2005, three soldiers (one junior sergeant and two privates) were convicted on charges of treason and sentenced to 11 to 12 years' prison time. The press reported that the soldiers deserted to the Armenian side in February 2005 and were trained from February to May 2005 to set off explosives along the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the president's usual travel routes, and the Baku airport. The three were returned to Azerbaijan from Armenian "camps" with the assistance of the International Committee of the Red Cross but according to reports, did not detail the "training" they allegedly had received. The MNS did not release details as to how the alleged plot was uncovered. The soldiers were convicted on charges of treason, desertion, violation of the code of military conduct, and the misuse of authority during engagement or battle.

KLO PROTESTS ARMENIAN PRESENCE AT CONFERENCE

14. (SBU) Against this backdrop, on March 16 the Karabakh Liberation Organization (KLO) attempted to stage a protest at the Radisson Park Inn Hotel because of the participation of an Armenian delegation in an OSCE transportation conference. Police prevented the protest and detained several members who had entered the hotel until the conference finished on March 17. A USG representative at the conference told EconOff that the participants were unaware of the scuffle and that the only mention of the incident at the press conference for the event was a question on who issued visas to the Armenians.

OFFICIAL RHETORIC CONTINUES

15. (U) In a speech at a Novruz event on March 21, President Aliyev stated clearly the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan is not up for negotiation and said the patience of the Azerbaijani people is not without limit. He blamed Armenia for not being constructive and discussed the damage Armenia may face due to its "self-isolation" from regional projects. Similarly, the President's International Relations Advisor Novruz Mammadov also was reported as saying that Azerbaijan may change its viewpoint on negotiations if Armenia maintains its "radical" position. However, Mammadov also did not exclude the possibility of new meetings between the Foreign Ministers and possibly even the Presidents in 2006. Press reports over the weekend also speculated about a direct correlation between perceived intensified USG efforts to negotiate a settlement as the chances for conflict with Iran increase.

COUNTER-NOTE SOUNDED AT WORLD AZERI CONGRESS

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16. (U) During a speech on a number of topics, President Aliyev voiced conciliatory themes on a day when EUR Assistant Secretary Dan Fried was meeting with Armenian President Kocharian. Aliyev said Azerbaijan will remain "loyal" to the negotiations. He said Azerbaijan wants to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh problem through peaceful means. Once the occupied territories were regained, he pledged to rebuild the infrastructure. Aliyev called on Armenia to agree on the very useful suggestions of the Minsk Group Co-Chairs.

HARNISH